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ABSTRACT

The concept of volunteerism is not well known in Japan and the word itself, "borantia" is borrowed from English. However, voluntary programs do exist in Japan. This report attempts to describe the way in which volunteerism operates (or does not operate) in Japan by discussing the organization of Japanese society, its implications for volunteerism, the primary motivations for volunteering, personal constraints to volunteering, and the key characteristics of volunteer involvement. A number of recommendations also are made for the further development of Japanese volunteerism. Though the case presented is that of Japan, many of the issues raised also have relevance for other societies and cultures. The report is intended to help volunteers and those who work with them gain a clearer understanding of their work and to discover better ways to accomplish goals. (DB)

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Summary of Findings from Japan

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THE AFS VOLUNTEER RESOURCES STUDY

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The AFS Volunteer Resources Study
Summary of Findings from Japan

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January 1989

Introduction

Volunteering is a function of the way in which a society organizes itself and of how that society defines the needs of its population. Societies can meet their needs through the creation of government bodies, through the institution of the family, through the establishment of social obligations between people, through the free-willed donation of labor by some members of that society, or through any combination of these. It is also true that some societies recognize and attempt to fulfill needs that other societies do not. Individual liberty, emotional fulfillment, freedom from poverty, or intercultural education, for example, are not uniformly recognized as important needs to fulfill.

In Japan, the concept of volunteerism is not well known. The word itself, "borantia" is borrowed from English. It has only been commonly used since the Second World War, and may still be unknown to many older Japanese people. However, voluntary organizations do exist in Japan. Some (such as AFS Intercultural Programs or the International Red Cross) are part of an international voluntary organization or movement. Others were created within the society in response to particular needs perceived by Japanese people.

In this report, we attempt to describe the way in which volunteerism operates (or does not operate) in Japan. The motivations of volunteers in Japan, the issues and concerns of volunteer organizations, and the attitudes within the society toward "borantia" are all explored. Though the case being presented here is that of Japan, we believe that many of the issues raised also have relevance for other societies and cultures. The information in this report should help volunteers and those who work with them to gain a clearer understanding of their work and so be able to discover better ways to accomplish their goals.

The Organization of Japanese Society

Membership in a Group. Identity in Japan is most often group identity rather than individual identity. People in Japan are most interested in identifying people by the group to which they belong rather than by individual characteristics such as the type

of work a person does or his or her interests or ideas. Japanese employees are expected to describe themselves by saying "I am from XYZ Company" rather than "I am a computer engineer." Life-time employment with the same firm is expected rather than moving up the "career ladder" by frequently changing companies. A free-lance professional, for example, has a difficult time operating without the necessary set of relationships that is provided by membership in a group.

Group membership generally provides for a wide variety of basic needs. Business firms are a primary group for Japanese employees and these firms often provide subsidized housing, hospitals, recreational facilities, and vacation homes for their employees. The sense of belonging to the group is extremely important to one's personal security and survival.

In general, the group is so demanding of a person's time and energy that very few people ever consider belonging to several groups at the same time. For most, the primary group is the business or work place. The personal and emotional commitment demanded by the business or work place is tremendous; whatever spare time may exist will most certainly be spent with the family. Under such circumstances, there is little time to think about volunteering.

There is another aspect of belonging to a group that adversely affects an individual's tendency to volunteer: group membership demands homogeneity. No one wants to be seen as doing something different than the other members of the group. Volunteering on an individual basis would clearly be something different. A Japanese expression that typifies the disapproval of individualistic values in this extremely homogeneous society is translated as: "The nail that sticks up is hammered down." In this context of conforming, it may be necessary for organizations to recruit the entire group as volunteers rather than try individual recruitment.

Hierarchical Organization. Japanese society is also characterized by its strong hierarchies of relationships. Those with the most seniority are generally seen as those with the most importance. Any relationship between two people is determined to a large extent by their relative levels of importance or positions in the hierarchy.

In many voluntary organizations, the structure is seen as comparatively loose and lacking rigidly defined roles based on seniority. This tends to be attractive to people who are consideringvoluntary work because it is a refreshing change from the way in which Japanese society is organized. However, after the initial attraction of this looser structure, volunteers become frustrated in their work by the lack of clear direction and specific roles.

Responsibility Undertaken Seriously. In Japanese society, having assigned responsibility is viewed as an important commitment that cannot be discarded. Volunteers take their responsibilities very seriously and feel obliged to remain in a particular position until these commitments are fulfilled. This level of dedication makes them reluctant to take on tasks that demand a great deal, or that they cannot see to completion. Many individuals will decide not to become involved at all rather than commit themselves to a task that may interfere with family or business obligations. Those who do volunteer often seek to limit their responsibilities by asking, "When is my task fully completed?" or "What is the limit of my responsibilities?" The Japanese volunteer is generally unwilling to make too many of these important commitments.

Because responsibilities once taken cannot be shirked, many volunteers are quite reluctant to take the initiative (and hence, the responsibility) in their volunteer work. They prefer to wait for directions and to know very precisely what their job entails. This is the very familiar style of the typical Japanese work place.

Women's Role in Japanese Society. Opportunities for women are limited in Japanese society; only a small proportion of women with families have the chance to take on a career as well, despite a 1986 law establishing equal opportunities for women in the work place. For most married Japanese women, home and family are their primary responsibilities. Many women, especially those with a high level of education, want to find a way to use and develop their skills in activities outside of the household and look for ways in which they can learn or contribute their skills. Involvement in volunteer activities is one of the few available opportunities for these women.

In these cases, volunteer activities must be made congruent with the demands of the family. A typical comment is, "I want to volunteer only during the time when all of my family members are away from home. When they are home, I want to be with them. I do not want them to be inconvenienced or feel uncomfortable because I am away." Volunteer activities that can be fit into the family schedule are most likely to attract volunteers. The cause or area of interest is often of secondary importance to the married woman who volunteers.

Primary Motivations for Volunteering

Obligation: "On" and "Giri". Motivation to volunteer is very strongly related in Japan to the sense of obligation. People who receive benefits from a voluntary organization will feel obliged to return their labor and time in exchange for the benefits they have received. Japanese volunteers may typically say such things as, "Since my son received so much assistance from AFS (or another organization), this is the time we should return something to the organization."

The concept of "on" is a peculiarly Japanese notion that refers to both the gratitude and guilt that one has toward a benefactor. But it is often considered burdensome to receive "on" because the person who receives the favor is obliged to repay the debt. Being obliged toward another is a loss of freedom, and the Japanese person who has received a favor is likely to want to repay it as quickly as possible in order to regain a sense of autonomy. This situation is sometimes expressed by the word "giri." Japanese working in volunteer fields have been quick to point out the importance of considering the feelings of the recipient of volunteer services. It is not helpful to saddle another person with a huge obligation that they can never hope to repay.

While there is a definite expectation of repayment generally in Japanese society, it is not acceptable for a benefactor to openly demand repayment. Those who are benefactors must appear to be altruistic in their actions rather than calculating the repayment that they are due. It seems that some volunteers in Japan are seen as having an image of being altruistic while merely using this image to hide their real motivation, the expected repayment. This may explain why some volunteers, particularly in highly visible positions, are seen as "hypocrites."

Personal Involvement. Many volunteers do not see themselves as doing something for others but more as doing something for themselves. They may be repaying an obligation for some previous benefit received, or they may believe that they might obtain some future benefit. Even in the area of social welfare, volunteers are not so much moved by pity but consider it a real possibility that they, themselves, might someday need this kind of social service.

A Desire to Learn. While learning is an important motivation to volunteer in many countries, it may be an even stronger motivation in Japan. Women in Japan, especially, are attracted to activities that will provide them with new information, skills, or intellectual stimulation. It is noteworthy that Japanese women are also likely to seek out opportunities for learning in many of the adult education centers where a variety of classes are taught. Japanese who volunteer often report feeling very satisfied about the learning they achieve in their volunteer activity.

A Desire to Contribute to Society. Women and others who do not have jobs commensurate with their skills or level of education are likely to feel a need to contribute to the society. Some women whose children were grown reported a feeling of tremendous loss. "I want to feel that I am still needed," was a typical comment. Volunteers in international exchange are often drawn by the idea that their work somehow contributes to an internationalization of Japan, and to efforts to promote understanding between nations. In this way, volunteer activity is very fulfilling to many Japanese volunteers.

A Desire for a Different Pattern of Work. Some people feel that the time they spend volunteering is like an oasis in the strict routine of everyday life and work. In particular, the perceived lack of a vertical order or hierarchy in volunteer activities is especially appealing regardless of what status a person holds in the working world. Those with high status and power in their jobs enjoy the informal and easy-going tasks they find in volunteer work. Those who hold an inferior status in their work places find in volunteer work a chance to exert some power or influence.

But if the volunteer work begins to resemble the kind of work that one does for pay, many volunteers become discouraged and leave the organization. One former Red Cross volunteer explained:

> "I became extremely busy doing volunteer work. All the responsibility as well as the paper work became my job. I wanted the choice about participating; the work should not become my duty. It began to feel like a part-time job and if I am going to work like this I would rather be paid."

Although volunteering is not well-known in Japan, those who do volunteer tend to find a great deal of satisfaction and fulfillment in this work.

Personal Constraints To Volunteering

Lack of Spare Time. The Japanese people work extremely hard during long hours: men for their employers and women for their families. Some of the typical attitudes found among those who do not volunteer are: "I have no spare time for volunteer activity," or "People who volunteer are quite rich and can afford to spend time and money for others." The lack of spare time is related to the hierarchy of the society and the all-embracing commitment that employers expect from their staff, and that families expect of their mothers. In this context, any activity that does not serve this primary commitment is viewed as a luxury, something that those with plenty of time and money can afford to do but the ordinary person cannot.

Need for Perfection. For some Japanese, volunteer activities are not carried out in a professional manner and they prefer not to be involved in activities that operate imperfectly. One person commented: "In volunteer work, it seems to me that everything is done by halves. I do not like to do things that cannot turn out perfectly."

No One Asked. In Japan, as in virtually every other country in this study, people who are not volunteers often report that they have not been asked to volunteer. Generally, they have not specifically decided against volunteering; they simply have not been

recruited. The low incidence of volunteerism in Japan may well be related to the lack of any real recruitment of new volunteers.

Negative Attitudes Towards Volunteers. In Japan, volunteerism is largely viewed as motivated by pity toward the less fortunate. Those who volunteer are sometimes told by their friends, "You are a curious person to help others." It seems to be generally felt that anyone with spare time and energy would put that time and energy into doing things for his or her own family rather than for others. In addition, it is also typical for those who do not volunteer to feel that those who do are too boastful about their activities. One such respondent commented:

> "Some of the volunteers act really conceited about what they are doing. They are almost saying that they are the only people who are doing very important things in the society. I really do not want to be with these people. They should be more moderate."

Key Characteristics of Volunteer Involvement in Japanese Organizations

Threshold factor. Though there are numerous constraints to involvement in volunteer activities, there seems to be a threshold effect operating. The barriers to volunteering in Japanese society seem to discourage people from ever becoming volunteers, but once a person becomes involved in one volunteer activity, that person is more likely to want to become involved repeatedly and in other volunteer activities. After the initial volunteer experience, a person is more interested in these activities because of the personal satisfaction they offer and the opportunities to learn and build friendships.

Multiple Involvements of a Few Key Individuals. In small towns especially, all the organized volunteer work is done by the same few individuals. One volunteer in such a community noted that it was impossible to schedule a meeting on the same evening as another organization in town because everyone in their organization also had to attend the other meeting. In many cases like this, volunteer activity is part of an important business network and the motivation to become involved in volunteer activity is to fulfill the obligations one has incurred toward other members of this business network. The purpose of the volunteer organization is secondary to the social and business obligations that such activity fulfills.

Young Volunteers. University students in particular seem to prefer the social activities of volunteer work rather than any routine tasks. Among this group, volunteer work is seen more as a club activity and social events are the most important attraction to

a volunteer organization. Most students belong to more than one club, but only a few such clubs could be considered as volunteer work. Within these clubs, personal relationships are very important. Since it is difficult to form close relationships with other students in the context of the classroom, university students search for friends in clubs and volunteer activities. AFS in Tokyo has such a group of university volunteers.

Power Struggles. Difficulties may sometimes arise when volunteers attempt to share responsibility and power. One such situation was found in which two volunteers wanted to hold the same office within a local organization. Both of these individuals believed that their particular qualifications were better for the volunteer post than those of the other person. This led to a situation of intense personal conflict that was damaging to the volunteer organization. It seemed impossible for them to share tasks or cooperate and take advantage of their different strengths. Both people felt that they were absolutely essential to the organization. Eventually, one of the volunteers decided to quit rather than assume a different position or continue the power struggle.

Though displays of strong emotion are not common in Japan and most people do not devote so much energy to their volunteer work, in some cases individuals pour a tremendous amount of energy into the volunteer organization and expect in return to have a high level of power or influence within the organization.

A second sort of power struggle concerns the "we" versus "they" attitude that characterizes several types of relationships and tends to be destructive of the goals of the volunteer organization. Volunteer and staff relationships are sometimes characterized by this attitude, especially when the volunteers operate at the local level and deal with a national level staff. But "we" and "they" also seems to be a destructive force when two volunteer organizations with the same goals end up in a competitive situation. There is often much energy wasted trying to fight another volunteer organization rather than engaging in cooperative efforts.

Organizational Dynamics. The relationship between staff and volunteers seems to be a difficult dynamic in any organization. To a large extent, the difficulties stem from the volunteers' reluctance to take on full responsibility for the activities of the organization. A volunteer may say, "Since I am a volunteer, I don't have to do anything further on this." This is another example of the way in which volunteers in Japan will frequently try to limit the extent of their responsibilities; in this case, the volunteer insists on a narrow definition of his or her responsibilities. This attitude can create a problem not only for staff but also for other volunteers who want to depend on volunteers to be responsible for certain work. This situation seems to lead frequently to conflict, since those who assume overall responsibility for the work of the organiza-

tion (either because they are paid or because they feel a strong commitment) begin to resent those who severely limit their responsibilities.

One local AFS organization in Japan avoided some of these problems and seemed to operate very well. This case may be instructive. The initial steering person for this local organization had a strong desire to see an international exchange program in the community, but he did not have any particular desire for power. He tried to find people who shared his interest in exchange and who could stimulate each other to work on developing the AFS program. Each of these people had a primary motivation to promote international exchange; it was not particularly important that AFS was the organization with which they would work. As a group, they developed a formal board structure in which each person's role is changed every few years so that no volunteer holds onto one role for very long and all long-term volunteers are able to work on a variety of tasks.

International Exchange Volunteers

Volunteers for international exchange programs such as AFS are somewhat different from volunteers in the area of social service in that those working with exchange programs are more likely to be upper middle-class whereas in the social welfare area volunteers come from a variety of social backgrounds. The social status differences may stem from the fact that travel abroad and international assignments are more typical of these higher social classes. Indeed, most international exchange volunteers have a personal motivation for their volunteer involvement. Many have sent sons or daughters on exchange programs and feel obliged to provide a similar opportunity to those in other countries. Others have lived abroad, or have made friends with people from other countries and wish to help foreigners coming to Japan. Many Japanese recognize a need for their country to improve its international relations and believe that exchange programs are a good avenue for this goal.

However, this type of volunteer work is not so well known in Japan as activities such as visiting nursing homes, orphans, and the handicapped. If Japanese people think of international volunteers, they are more likely to think of those groups that provide charity to refugees, or volunteers for international development agencies. There is always the idea in the Japanese mind that volunteer work is done by "advantaged" people to benefit the "disadvantaged."

Working to support or promote international exchange programs is not something that immediately comes to mind when the word, "borantia" is mentioned. This may be due to the fact that an international exchange program is considered quite a luxury compared to some of the basic needs that are often provided by volunteer agencies.

In some cases, volunteers for international exchange programs have tremendous expectations for what they will gain in return for their volunteer work. Though many volunteers are repaying obligations for their children's participation in an exchange program, or simply to repay kindnesses they themselves received while visiting another country, other volunteers seem to be motivated by specific benefits. For example, some people volunteer in the expectation that they will learn English. This presents a problem for these volunteers if the student hosted in the community is not an English speaker. Similarly, one host family complained, "We wish we could have a student who is Western-looking and charming." Their apparent hopes were to achieve some level of status or attention in the neighborhood through their foreign house guest. This is probably not a motivation that many exchange organizations would want to encourage.

Recommendations for AFS Volunteer Development in Japan

1. If AFS in Japan hopes to use volunteers in positions of responsibility, it is essential to provide them with organized information and training sessions.

One of the key motivations for volunteering is to learn. Many of the people interviewed specifically mentioned a desire to learn and to do work that is stimulating and valuable. Volunteer organizations that require specific skills have generally done an excellent job of providing such skills training to their volunteers. Some classic examples are emergency medical volunteers and volunteers who translate Japanese books into braille.

On the other hand, in organizations for which specific skills are not required of their volunteers, training programs are weak or non-existent. Typically only a few brief orientations are provided. The volunteers expect more organized training, however. These organizations (AFS is among them) seem to believe that the skills required for the volunteer work are already possessed by the volunteers.

The volunteers may in fact have the necessary skills, but not have the information about the organizational structure and the roles that they are expected to play. Japanese in particular are accustomed to working under certain direction and rules and under such conditions feel comfortable carrying out their responsibilities. When there is a problem to be confronted, the Japanese person generally tends to ask what are the organization's rules and policies concerning this situation rather than try to determine independently what should be done. The Japanese volunteer who does not have a good understanding of the organization's policies and procedures will tend to feel very uncomfortable taking on responsibilities. Organized training is necessary for volunteers to understand their roles and responsibilities in the organization.

2. AFS should consistently show appreciation for the work done by its volunteers.

The importance of recognizing volunteers has been repeatedly noted in all the countries in this project, but recognition is much less frequently put into practice. While some volunteers are motivated by the public attention they may receive for the work they do, it is not public recognition that most volunteers in Japan seek. Generally the greatest reward is simply knowing that the work one does is valued. For example, a woman who for the past five years has worked alone in her home to make recordings for blind people told the researcher, "I am so glad when I receive a newsletter from our organization talking about the blind people who were so happy to hear the tapes we recorded for them." An AFS volunteer had a similar comment, "I feel happy about continuing to volunteer when I meet those exchange students we hosted a long time ago and find that they are playing an active role in promoting world peace."

Not receiving any information about the value of their work will typically prevent people from volunteering further.

3. AFS should actively advertise volunteer opportunities to those who have had international living experiences.

Most Japanese volunteers were recruited through word of mouth. This means that most volunteers in any organization belong to the same social circle and that the potential to recruit other volunteers is largely untapped. More active recruitment should be attempted.

Understanding the motivations of volunteers suggests ways of appealing to specific groups. For example, many AFS volunteers contribute their time out of a sense of obligation; this is not necessarily an obligation to AFS specifically but an obligation to repay kindnesses that the person or a son or daughter had received while abroad. Specific recruitment tools that reminded Japanese people about friendly people they may have met when traveling in other countries, or the help they may have received while abroad, could encourage those people to consider repaying their obligations by volunteering for AFS.

Similarly, volunteer recruitment strategies aimed at women could describe the contribution that exchange programs make to Japanese society, and could focus on the fact that volunteers are people who feel that they are needed. This is discussed further in the next recommendation.

4. AFS should make more efforts to recruit women and offer them positions of prestige and responsibility.

Since women in Japan have few opportunities to work in responsible positions in the

society, volunteering has a special attraction for educated women. An organization such as AFS, with its international focus, can provide interesting opportunities for learning and personal development. These aspects of AFS should be emphasized and actively promoted among audiences of educated, adult women.

At the same time, the pressure on women to attend to the responsibilities of the home means that many of the potential women volunteers will place their first priority on their families. AFS should tailor some volunteer tasks to fit the schedules that these women have.

5. AFS should help promote a more positive image of volunteering in Japan.

The negative images of volunteering may discourage some Japanese people from becoming involved in these activities in the first place. AFS should promote the idea that volunteering for international exchange is not a case of the superior, advantaged person giving to the inferior, disadvantaged person. Instead it should be emphasized that volunteering for AFS is an activity of equal exchange. Potential volunteers should be informed that exchange students can contribute much to the Japanese school, host family, and to the volunteer who assists the students in their adaptation to Japan.

6. AFS should organize informal meetings and get-acquainted sessions for volunteers but also have a clear organizational structure and well-defined responsibilities for volunteers.

Volunteers are attracted to informal organizations and like the feeling that their is no rigid hierarchy. However, they also need a solid understanding of how the organization operates and what tasks are expected of them. Clarity of structure and responsibility does not necessarily clash with informality of social atmosphere, even in Japan. Volunteer organizations need to keep in mind the importance of informal social events for the volunteers while maintaining a clear functional system so that organizational policy and lines of responsibility remain clear.

7. AFS should develop contacts in Japanese businesses whenever practical.

Japanese businesses demand a tremendous commitment from their employees covering almost every aspect of their lives. For this reason, individuals are unlikely to take on a special activity like volunteering unless it is within the context of their corporation or business. AFS should seek to establish relationships with corporations that would introduce the exchange programs to employees at all levels of the corporation. A business that becomes involved in the exchange programs could recruit volunteers and host families, encourage the participation of the children of employees, and provide activities for the exchange students hosted in Japan.